

Frank Todisco, Board Chair called the regular meeting to order in the District Office Board of Education Meeting Room, Pawcatuck, CT at 7:00p.m. Members present were Heidi Simmons, Secretary, Gordon Lord, Jack Morehouse, and Farouk Rajab. Members Virtual: Craig Esposito; Members Absent: Alisa Morrison. Also present were Ana de Oliveira, Recording Secretary, Dr. Van Riley, Superintendent of Schools, members of the administration staff and interested citizens.

Communications & Recognitions

Gordon Lord acknowledged Mr. Joe Ciriello a former Stonington High School coach who recently passed. Recognizing him for his team work on and off the field, friend, mentor and embodying everything the community stands for.

Jack Morehouse also echoed what Mr. Lord stated regarding Mr. Ciriello, adding he was his tennis coach, always a positive person who set the bar high, he will be missed.

Comments from Citizens

Melissa Collier thanked the administration for the coordination and care of back to school. She spoke the district has a responsibility to help students, with focus on academic and social supports. She voiced that intervention and tutoring matters as far as how students do. She added that anxiety and depression is increasing among students.

Marika Heughins spoke she has been in the district for twenty-five years. She thanked the Board of Education, Dr. Riley, Mrs. Butler and all the administration for doing a wonderful job keeping students safe over the last 18 months of the pandemic. She spoke of her personal experiences with regards to her health and advocates for wearing masks. She voiced we should support our administrators who have spent the last months working to keep everyone safe and thanked administration for standing by the CDC guidelines.

Meg Blanchette spoke on diversity and how impressed she is with all that is happening in the district with this issue. She thanked the Board for what they have been doing in regards to Critical Race Theory. She added keep doing the DEI work, adding she appreciates it.

Jennifer Evering spoke she opposes the masking of the children. She added the data is not there to support masking kids for eight hours a day. She shared data from Atkins regarding the effects of mask wearing. She asked that the Board and administration stand up for kids who don't have a voice and be the first district to make the call. She asked the Board to give parents the choice whether they want their kids masked.

Rosa Burger spoke of supporting the mask mandate. She noted other districts are having masks optional and the outcome of that decision. She spoke of her personal experience with her own child not being of age to get vaccinated and the need to be masked for protection.

Adam Lincus thanked the Board and administration for the work on DEI. He noted he is a parent of two black children and the lack of diversity in the schools. He also added the district and school leaders have had real conversations to move the district forward on diversity and equity. Mr. Lincus spoke of his personal conversations at home in regards to humility and kindness with his children. He voiced there is still a lot of work to be done in Stonington Public Schools but acknowledged that we have a community of humility and respect.

William Heughins thanked the administration for the statement that went out on DEI and added the district he works in is using it in their district also. He commented he wanted the Board and administration to know that the town is behind them and that they are doing a great job.

Ashley Tewell commented about the executive order regarding mask wearing in effective until September 30th. She would like the Board to make this an option for our schools. She spoke about Critical Race Theory and feels teachers could teach this but noted this is not happening at the middle school level. She also commented on how citizens were treated at a prior Board meeting and the need of respecting others. She shared each of the school districts philosophies, vision and beliefs.

Jeff Lewis commented on Critical Race Theory. He noted that the district does not teach about CRT but does endorse DEI. He asked that the community visit the school website to see what types of DEI initiatives are in place. He spoke of his teaching model and his obligation to students when they have questions related to these topics.

Connie Szymonik commented on the change of Columbus Day on the school calendar. She asked that the Board change the day back to Columbus Day on the calendar. She spoke about Stonington Public Schools' curriculum as it relates to Critical Race Theory. She expressed we need to be careful on how we present CRT to children.

Bruce Yarnall comment that teachers in history class at the high school do not teach anything related to CRT but do teach the history. He gave examples of what is taught regarding history and student questions about historic events. He also commented on masks and how they keep us safe, and stated it is all about keeping people safe.

Mike Costanza commented on his own experience with diversity. He voiced his opinion on the topic adding that no two human beings are alike. He spoke on Critical Race Theory, the use of common sense, and to be good to one another. He noted that teachers need to respect all students and students need to feel safe to speak to teachers if they need to. He commented he hopes the Board stands up for mask options and let the parents choose if they want the masks or not.

Joseph Trelli comment on the change of the Columbus Day and his feelings towards this issue. He spoke about masks, noting he worked at a camp with many students this summer who all wore masks. He commented on his own experiences with DEI.

Shaun Dinwoodie commented he is the co-founder of a local social justice group Ray of Hope. He shared his own personal experiences regarding diversity and equity and what people of color face every day. He thanked the administration for what they are doing regarding this issue.

Bruce Szymonik expressed his views regarding CRT and information regarding states that are banning CRT. He added we want our kids to know how to think and not what to think and is strongly against CRT. He shared his thoughts regarding reinstating Columbus Day on the calendar.

Consent Agenda

A. Minutes – June 10, 2021

June 17, 2021

June 24, 2021

B. Checks and Bills – June 20/21 and July 20/21, July 21/22

C. Personnel Report

The following motion was made by Jack Morehouse and seconded by Farouk Rajab:

Motion 1: To accept the consent agenda items A - C

All: Aye

Policy for Approval – Policy 4118.51 Social Media

Dr. Riley explained the Board has previously seen drafts of this policy and if they have particular questions Mary Anne Butler, Assistant Superintendent would answer their questions. He added we are requesting to have this approved so that we can get this out to staff prior to the beginning of school. Jack Morehouse asked if this is a policy written by CAFE or done in house. Dr. Riley answered it is a CAFE policy. Mr. Morehouse asked how this is different than the current policy. Mary Anne Butler explained the policy has been reviewed by our attorney, this is from CAFE. The district is sensitive to the rights of teachers and the use of social media and devices. Mr. Morehouse asked if we consulted with the teachers' union. Mrs. Butler answered yes. She noted that the attorney made some clarifications to the policy. Mr. Morehouse expressed that in some circumstances this type of thing has become an issue and would like to sit down with Mrs. Butler and the Board attorney to discuss it. Mrs. Butler noted we wanted to get this approved for Professional Development but can kick it to the COW meeting for further discussion. Chair Frank Todisco voiced we will move this policy to the COW for more review.

Report of the Superintendent of Schools

Update on School Opening and COVID-19 Issues – Dr. Riley spoke on the opening of schools and noted we will require all adults and students in the buildings to wear masks at least until September 30th. We strongly encourage mask breaks and we will have tents set up outside. We will not require masks outside, and are providing the safest environment we can. Dr. Riley reported at this point we will not be offering a full remote option. The exception would be special ed or 504 students that are medically compromised in some way. We have put together a podcast that answers some of these questions and others with Chairman Todisco, Michael Freeman and myself who were interviewed by Mary Anne Butler and should be posted on our website by Monday. Dr. Riley also mentioned that we have the opportunity like every other district in the state to offer free testing to K-6 students and it is totally optional for parents. If they want their child to have COVID-19 testing twice a week, our COVID-19 testing clinic will perform testing to only the students that parents want to get tested. We will be applying for this and Dr. Riley noted that

other districts want to do this also. This probably won't start until middle to end of September. Dr. Riley thanked the summer school staff particularly, Kristen Oliverio, Allison Van Etten and others. We had a fun program, students were outside as much as possible. It was refreshing to see everyone working together on projects. This was a very successful program we had over 160 non-special ed students attend. He thanked teachers, administration staff for putting this together. Dr. Riley also shared the Critical Race Theory (CRT) document with the Board. He noted we do not teach CRT but teach being respectful and will continue to do that. Heidi Simmons shared her comments on the Critical Race Theory. She spoke of the complexity of this issue and the recent book she read that afforded her a better understanding of CRT called "The Fatal Invention". She added we are born into one race "the human race". She thanked the teachers and staff for what they are doing about CRT. Jack Morehouse voiced he supports the statement that Stonington Public Schools put out on Critical Race Theory. It is important to have conversations with students that may be uncomfortable about race and race relations in our country. He hopes that students in Stonington through their experiences learn to become good critical thinkers and always strive for more information and actively seeking to be part of the conversation that will ultimately shape our community and country as we move forward. He noted he is proud of all who spoke regarding this issue. Gordon Lord had a question regarding K-6 testing and asked if the Board would be able to get data on the number of kids that were tested. Dr. Riley answered yes we can share that number. Mr. Lord mentioned that at the BEARS advisory meeting, it was great to have Ledge Light present. He noted no one likes to wear masks but we need to make sure we stay connected and transparent with the community. He offered the idea of getting Ledge Light to attend a Board meeting to explain what they are currently seeing because Ledge Light is the guidance the district is taking. He shared that the Board before numbers changed, sent a note to the governor requesting not to wear masks, but things have changed in the last 60 days. Mr. Lord noted that it is important that the community is aware that the administration and Board have been extremely proactive on that topic. He voiced again that he would like to see health authorities at the next Board meeting to be transparent to the community around this topic. Dr. Riley agreed we will do that and also be putting together a podcast with Ledge Light so parents understand if they are signing up for this option what it means, how often kids get tested and how they get results back.

Update on ESSER II and ARP Funds – Dr. Riley spoke on the ESSER II funding. He thanked the principals and teaching staff for their input of their needs and positions at each site. He added we have been working on this for a few months and are looking for not only academic assistance where it is needed but also a number of SEL positions, family liaison, etc. We know that social and emotional needs of students is prime. Dr. Riley explained what the funds will be used for and what positions they will be applied to. He spoke on the ARP funds and when those will be available. He noted each school is very different in their needs.

Discussion and Direction Regarding School Calendar

Chairman Frank Todisco noted this was an item that he was asked to add to the agenda. Heidi Simmons spoke she appreciated that Chairman Todisco added this to the agenda. She explained that at a previous meeting in which she chaired the Board accepted a calendar that changed the Columbus Day to Indigenous People Day and noted she takes full responsibility for that because she was chair at the meeting at that time. She added on that basis, she moved that the name of that holiday go back to Columbus Day and not consider any changes without a public hearing.

The following motion was made by Heidi Simmons and seconded by Gordon Lord:

Motion 2: Move that the name of the holiday be changed back to Columbus Day.

Board discussed the motion:

Gordon Lord noted that at the previous meeting we were focused on the Professional Development Days and that went through with not much discussion. He added we need more community input before we make that call. Farouk Rajab shared he personally would like to keep it as Indigenous People Day. Heidi Simmons voiced she appreciates the Indigenous People Day but we need to look where we are and that we are next to Westerly, of the statue, and the Italian culture. She thinks that an Indigenous Day could also be added to the calendar. She would like to know what would be taught on those days and see the curriculum for those days..

Vote: Frank Todisco – Yes
Heidi Simmons – Yes
Jack Morehouse – No

Gordon Lord - Yes
Farouk Rajab – No
Craig Esposito - No

Motion: Did Not Pass

Discussion and Recommendation Regarding Town ARP Fund Consideration

Dr. Riley reported that the ARP funding would mirror the plan for the ESSER II funding and will modify the plan as we know more. He shared that we have \$1,150,979 in funding. He spoke that one of the needs is air quality at Stonington Middle School and would like to use the 1.4 million balance for that project but would need a total of 2.8 million. He asked the Board if they would accept the idea of going to the Town to see if they would consider funding the other 1.4 million. Dr. Riley will draft a letter to the town with this suggestion. Jack Morehouse voiced that he supported this idea, and knows that as we see more hot days this would be a good thing to have. The Board was all in support of Dr. Riley reaching out to the Town for the matching funding.

Approval of Paraprofessional Employment Contract

Dr. Riley explained this is the last union contract that is open and recommended it be approved by the Board.

The following motion was made by Jack Morehouse and seconded by Heidi Simmons:

Motion 3: To approve the Paraprofessional Employment Contract.

Vote: Frank Todisco – Yes
Farouk Rajab – Abstained
Gordon Lord – Yes

Heidi Simmons – Yes
Jack Morehouse – Yes
Craig Esposito - Yes

Motion: Passed

Monthly Reports

Jack Morehouse asked how many students attended summer school. Dr. Riley responded over 160 general ed and additional special ed students. Heidi Simmons asked what grades attended. Dr. Riley responded it was pretty well distributed, and will get the exact numbers to the Board. Frank Todisco, Chair asked when will the last fiscal year be closed out and when will the Board get the final report. Gary Shettle, Director of Finance responded that will take a while, until purchase orders are closed out, but will be sooner this year than in the past.

Update on Board of Ed Advisory Council on Return to School (BEARS)

Gordon Lord commented there is not much to report, we will push our meeting of next week and the September 14th meeting to September 22nd so we can have an update on how back to school is going and also keep meetings going in the first half of the year. Heidi Simmons asked how quickly we can pivot. Dr. Riley noted it will be a lot smoother and quicker than in March. Our teachers are used to teaching remote, we hope we don't have to but can move quickly if we do. Mrs. Simmons asked if that issue will be discussed at the BEARS meeting. Gordon Lord commented he did not anticipate that discussion. Mrs. Simmons voiced she sees anxiety rising in parents because of the impact of the variant and would also feel nervous sending a young child to school. She questioned if we should have something for families like this. Frank Todisco, Chair noted that this discussion should be brought up at BEARS with administration. Mr. Lord noted the intent of BEARS is to review the item and then give that input to administration. Dr. Riley noted that the state has given guidance that a full remote will not be required in any district and they might also say that they want students full in person in every school. He added if you want to have remote it should come from a PPT or special ed but will keep the Board informed as rules and guidelines change.

Items for Future Agendas

No items for future agendas.

Board Comments/Concerns

Farouk Rajab apologized to the team in the back the team that led the name change from Columbus Day to Indigenous People Day and voiced he is sorry that we could not uphold your recommendation. He apologizes to the indigenous people of Connecticut, Mohegan tribes, Pequot Nation, all the people we try to celebrate. Heidi Simmons explained that going back to Columbus Day was not a disregard of what DEI or in disrespect of indigenous. It is a way to listen to the whole community and that really is our job. As a Board it is to represent who is out there, we were elected by them and being a representative includes that. She further explained because she had the vote back for reconsideration and reassessment she does not want to be labeled as someone who showed disrespect or disregard of what our DEI did.

Adjournment

The following motion was made by Gordon Lord and seconded by Jack Morehouse:

Motion 4: To adjourn at 8:43 p.m.

All: Aye